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Becoming Men, Becoming-Men?

A Collective Biography

Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt

Abstract In their collaborations over recent years the authors have worked, through their written dialogue, in pursuit of understanding subjectivities and their 'becomings.' Until now they have not explicitly explored their subjectivities as men. Their starting point in this paper is that they do not take the as-signation 'men' for granted. Using collective biography, they are interested in how the worlds that they inhabited and that inhabited them in their early lives produced, and continue to produce, 'boys' and 'men'.

Boarding School Stories

We sit on a bench on the station platform. The train is due in five minutes. I can't sit still, wriggling with anxiety and in my unfamiliar school uniform — grey flannel shorts and jacket, purple tie, white shirt, grey socks held up with purple and grey garters, black shoes. It's been weeks and it doesn't feel right.

I am holding my mum's hand, but surreptitiously. I did not sleep last night. I cried as my mother and father each gave me a hug good night and reassured me — "Don't worry, we'll see you soon. You'll enjoy it when you get there." And then lay awake, wishing it could be yesterday, last week, the beginning of the holidays, any day except the night before tomorrow.

We met in a pub.

"So, I wonder why I never saw you around before."

"Well, I've been away quite a lot."

"Away? What, living somewhere else?"

"Well, ...yes."

I could tell something was wrong. It felt as if I shouldn't be asking this. She seemed upset; her eyes were filling with tears. One big droplet of water spilled out of her eye and tumbled down her cheek.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to upset you, are you OK?"

"Yes, it's all right, it just brings back so many unhappy memories for me and I can't stop myself getting like this."

"We can talk about something else, if you like."

"No, really, it's OK, it's...it's...well, my parents..., my parents sent me away to boarding school when I was seven. I hated it. I couldn't understand why they wanted to do it. You know? I was only a baby. I felt so lost and rejected."

"How could they do that?"

"I don't know, I guess that they thought they were doing it for the best but it made me so sad. I just couldn't understand. My mum. Her face, when I was leaving. Why? Why? It was so terrible. Every time I think about it now or begin to talk about it I get really upset."

The station announcer tells us that the train is approaching. Beyond the platform I see it snaking its way between tracks, see it heading my way, drawing closer. I will it to slow down. It does, but not enough. Carriages pass. Mr Caverhill's head appears from a window. He waves. The carriage — it is in front of me now — is full of boys in grey and purple uniform. Rothschild minor, Marriott, Packman, and others I do not want to see. I do not want to see any of them.

My mother is beside me, standing tall, smiling at me, wishing me a good term, telling me it won't be long. I want to kiss her good bye, to breathe her in one last time, a nine-year old trying to get used to this termly routine of leaving home for twelve weeks. I want to be held and not let go, to be told that I don't have to go after all. But mindful of the gaze of fifty boys on my back I turn and climb onto the train and into a world without women.

This is not the worst time though. That will be tomorrow morning, and the next two or three, when I will wake in the mistaken belief that I am in my room at home, all football posters and friendliness, and look instead upon the whiteness of a dormitory wall.

Our conversation ebbed and flowed. We stayed close, talking and making love through the afternoon. I found that she wanted to talk about being sent away like that, at such a young age, so our conversation returned to those details on different occasions. It was so strange to me having been brought up in a close, loving family, living in a small cottage, so aware of my parents throughout my early life, to hear this story of what seem to me to be a kind of abandonment. She told me about getting drunk on cider when she was only 14 and being picked up by the police, unable to stand, totally incoherent

and senseless, still trying to come to terms with a life in which she didn't feel loved. As the light of our day together began to fade my mind began to grasp the sadness she felt through the powerful evocation of her stories but, somehow, my heart could still not come to terms with why or how this could be a part of the life of a family.

Ken reflects: Jonathan talks of the railway station, his mother's presence and his sadness at waiting for the train, knowing that it was going to take him away to school, away from family for weeks, maybe months. I describe a lover's tears and her description of the sadnesses she felt as, baffled and confused, she too was sent away to boarding school at the age of seven. What profound and hurting emotions these stories tell! I *sense* Jonathan on that station platform, somehow a child but still him, squeezing his mother's hand, holding back the tears, being brave. I am sensing him. My emotions. Right here, right now. This is embodied. I know what his writing means, what those experiences meant to him because they are my emotions; I can feel his experience through his story. I am giving *my* meaning to this: I have a sense of *my* mother's hand, of *my* tears, of putting on *my* brave face. I know Jonathan's story through this. I never had the experience of boarding school. It does not need to be essentialized. But I *have* held my mother's hand, not wanting its grip ever to loosen and I *have* struggled with the tears and the forced smiles as my train left the station and the waving figures of my mother and father slowly receded into the distance. I would have been much older than Jonathan was in his story, probably going back to my flat in London or back to university but still, on my own, I would be waving to my parents, tears on my face and a deep aching in my heart. Finally, I can remember pulling my head and shoulders in from the train window, my parents now distant, unrecognizable dots on the distant platform, and sitting down, trying to compose myself, immersing myself in a book to take the pain away and to avoid the eyes that I felt were upon me as the train began to pick up speed and take me on my journey. I remember those experiences so vividly.

Jonathan's story shows me feelings that I have about my family, my mother and father, now long gone, of not wanting to have to leave that simple world of belonging. It shows me that I am still a nine-year old boy now, wanting to be held, searching for the unquestioning comfort of love. It shows me, in a way of speaking, that I am still "mindful of the gaze of fifty boys on my back," that I am conscious of what others think and feel about what I do in my life. It also shows me that I have never experienced a "world without women." So what does Jonathan's story about boarding school tell me about us? What does it tell me about my understanding of him?

For one thing it tells me about how we are positioned differently according to the influence of class, a difference we have noted before (Gale and Wyatt, 2006). It tells me that in those terms our lives were different. I think that what I might have known about

boarding school in the early years of my life would have been abstract, something that I would have read about in books or comics, of a place where children, very different from me, went. I remember there were “forms,” “masters,” “fags,” all part of a mysterious *parole*, a restricted code of language that was not familiar to me. The experiences described were never mine, nor were they the experience of anyone I knew. It was only much later when a girl, whose life I had just begun to share, told me about the pain of boarding school for her, that I began to form a sense of something that I had never known. Her story and Jonathan’s tell me something, they bring the experience nearer to me and I give it meaning through a shared resonance with its constituted parts. Geertz (1973), Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) and others describe the role of narrative exchanges in helping to make individual, local and experiential knowledge ‘experience near’, so that we can begin to re-examine our lives and to look at them in relation to the lives and relationships of others. Through the showing and the telling we are making our stories more experience near and, hence, “thickening” them in the process.

As I write my writing is also beginning to speak to me about power; it is beginning to feel as if our thin descriptions have been, in part at least, discursively constructed for us. The powerful nonverbal language that made Jonathan “mindful of the gaze of fifty boys” spoke to him in ways that told him how to behave. So, in that situation, to be a boy (man?), the language of that gaze made it unacceptable to cry, to hug or kiss his mother, or in any way show discomfort at leaving what was then the dearest part of his world. While in the past those thin descriptions may have resisted reflexivity and existed in his life in a largely unquestioned world of representation, subjecting him to the socializing influences of gender, class, generation, and so on, by bringing them out into the open here and by responding to them in these ways we begin to enrich their signification, make them more convincing. Foucault describes his genealogical method as one that encourages an evaluation of discourse and which:

...entertain(s) the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledge against the claims of a unitary body of theory that would filter, hierarchise, and order them in the name of some true knowledge. (1980, p.83)

It seems to me that sharing feelings about those moments on that railway station when Jonathan was a child is a way of giving voice to what Foucault calls “local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledge.” By sending me that story, through the feeling that it evokes in me and through the words I send back to Jonathan, which he then responds to and so on, we begin that shared process of folding in and unfold-

ing, “enveloping-developing, involution-evolution” (Deleuze, 1993, p.8). This begins to build for me a sense of what re-membling (White, 2000) can mean: our embodied selves, our various subject positions, change as we re-consider, re-construct and give voice to what might have been liminal, latent but lost for a long time. Deleuze (1988, 2004) makes us aware of his use of Artaud’s *body without organs*: something that is not fixed, always changing and with sensation its “intensive reality” (2004, p.45).

Linked to this, Foucauldian genealogy suggests approaches that always provoke, push and strive to make the familiar strange, encouraging new ideas and ways of thinking about the processes that influence our subject positioning to emerge. I have certainly felt this beginning to happen as I write in response to Jonathan’s writing. It feels that the writing is offering me a method of inquiry (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) that, not only encourages reflections on his written experiences, but also, and at the same time, opens me up to thinking and feeling differently about the experiences that I have had and am having myself. Davies (Davies and Gannon, 2006) writes of her own experience of the process and practice of collective biography that

It was not our intention to find a way of reading and writing that escapes subjectification, but rather, to recognise how bodies are subjected within available discourses and thus become the selves we take them to be (ibid., p.19).

We are not talking about ourselves in relation to each other; we are talking *with* our selves through the writing, setting up lines of flight (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Deleuze and Parnet, 2002; etc.) and in so doing creating new ways of looking at who we are and how we are becoming.

I am aware of the need, in the words of Deleuze, to “create concepts that are always new” (1994, p.5), but in using this quotation again I have also become aware that Deleuze does not talk about the creation of concepts in a disembodied way: he stresses that this creativity requires *personnages conceptuels* (ibid., p.2), friends with whom to connect in order to create concepts. Later in the same introductory chapter, almost as a rhetorical aside, he poses the question: “is the actuality of the concept due to the potential of the friend...?” (ibid., p.5). On this *plane of immanence* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) where concepts are being created as events, as possibly subversive lines of flight, I again want to invoke the *body without organs* through Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion that “I am no longer myself but thought’s aptitude for finding itself and spreading across a plane that passes through me at several places” (ibid., p.64). For a moment in this writing my thoughts of thin and thick descriptions faded away; they did not disappear but simply receded as I struggled to give Deleuze a place in all this.

Hair stories

The oak-panelled hall is filled with a hundred and twenty prepubescent boys. They are seated two rows deep on benches along each side and at one end, with windows behind them. The headmaster stands tall at the other, open end of the hall, tapping a pen, for emphasis, on the long wooden table in front of him. The table is one of three placed length ways down the centre of the assembly room. This room is “The Middle,” where the boys gather twice a day.

Each, except one, is in gray-flannel uniform: shorts, purple tie, gray socks. Each, except one, has short hair above the ears. All are silent as the headmaster speaks.

It wasn't school for me, it was my Dad. Bless him. He had spent nearly ten years in the Army and had fought in the Second World War. His hair was cut in a regulation army style and consequently was shaved well up above his ears. Every third Friday in the month he would go to the barber's, Charlie Davy's in New Road, and have the bristles, that to me seemed hardly to have grown since the last time he had visited, dutifully cut into their desired shape and miniscule length. I don't know why I hated having my hair cut. Perhaps it was sitting waiting for my turn, listening to all the men talking about the war, cracking jokes, and teasing me about my hair, already much longer than they would ever have wanted to grow theirs. I didn't go with Dad to each one of these visits. My busy childhood schedules enabled me to avoid them occasionally but when the following visit came along I knew there would be no escape. The preceding week would have been peppered with comments and admonitions about the length of my hair, sprinkled with jokes about “buying a violin” or “tying it back in a bun.” In one way I quite liked going to Charlie Davy's because it gave me the opportunity, prior to the visit to the barber's, to go the library with my Dad on his weekly Friday evening visits come rain or shine. I loved that library, with its creaking floorboards and the quiet ticking of the grandfather clock. I loved the silence and the smell of the books. I joined the library on one of these visits with Dad and felt proud to be able to take out my first books. Even the thought of the horrors of the clippers and combs soon to be upon me didn't detract from the sheer sensual pleasure of being in that place and poring over the rows of books.

“The school rule,” he pronounces, “is that hair must be worn above the ears. It is about maintaining standards, retaining dignity. This rule applies to all pupils, even those who are visiting from abroad for the term.”

I am sat opposite Buster. Buster, with his home clothes, with his broad, swimmer's shoulders (he had broken all school records this summer), with his intriguing Scandinavian accent and, most impressively, with his long, fair hair curling to his shoulders. I want desperately to be like him, to be his friend. They're going to cut your hair, Buster. They're going to cut it.

Dad and I struggled over the length of my hair for years. When I went to college and stayed in lodgings during the week, the joy of the weekends were often tarnished by Dad's insistence that on Saturday morning I go and get my hair cut. I usually acquiesced but as the months went by and my hair grew, each haircut became less punitive in my eyes and less suitable in my Dad's. I remember a cut called a "Boston" which involved having your lengthening hair thinned and shaped into a kind of squared off inverted v at the back. I hoped that this "cut" would give some legitimacy to the growing length of my hair but not in my Dad's eyes: not only did this cut not look right, it was a waste of money. The apogee came one Saturday when, instead of going to the barber's with my five shillings, I went to Tavistock with Barry Lambert, on the back of his Triumph Bonneville, and arrived home at tea-time, too late for a haircut. Dad was furious. Too late for the barber's and another week to go by before he could put pressure on me to have it cut again. That night I remember sitting in our old armchairs, eating tea on our laps, a sad and sullen silence permeating our tiny front room. "Thank Your Lucky Stars" was on, on our old black-and-white television, and what happened as we watched that program has stayed with me.

It was 1963, I was 16 years old and in those days, music programs on TV were still produced as entertainment for the whole family. It was not unusual for the family to sit down and watch the show together. Most of the acts at that time would have been palatable, perhaps even enjoyable, for the older members of the family as well. Not on this night. I remember Brian Matthew, the host, introducing "The Rolling Stones with their first single, *Come On*," and my hair (such as it was) stood on end. I knew about the Stones, I had read about them in *Record Mirror* and *New Musical Express* (as the NME was known in those days), but I wasn't prepared for the attack of that short three-minute performance and the effect that it had on me upon me. Despite being trussed up in ill-fitting suits, they looked great. They were ugly, they were arrogant, and, most of all, they had long hair and they weren't afraid to show it. I was amazed, bowled over, I couldn't believe it: they looked great. I couldn't hide my delight. My poor dad was also amazed; he had never seen anything like it and obviously didn't want to again. My memory of what happened after that is hazy. I know that Dad got up from his chair and switched off the television. It was too much for him. With

his experience of my rebellion still fresh in his mind and now, on national TV, to be confronted with musicians with hair much longer than mine (and who I happened to think were fantastic) tipped him over the edge. I suppose from that day onwards, for quite a long time, me, my hair, and Dad's intense dislike of it, became a serious issue for us. In a way Mum was marginalized by it all; it was a conflict between me and Dad and she tried to set herself up as the mediator. I don't think that she was really bothered either way. She always worked hard to try to achieve a happy life for all of us but I know that it was a difficult time. I can remember going to Plymouth with my parents, and Dad not wanting to walk with me because of how I looked. I know that the really powerful effects of military regimentation created that dislike of my hair in Dad. There was a deep insidious hegemony at work which strived to achieve what Goffman (1968) called "mortification of the self" so that those who belonged to the regime conformed to its wishes. Of course, it was more than that. It was also about his son challenging his authority, wanting to make his own way in life at a time when generational differences and challenges to parental authority were quite rare, and about an emerging way of life for the first post war generation of young people.

They're going to cut your hair, Buster. They're going to cut it.

In the shadow behind the headmaster, underneath the wooden staircase, the rest of the school staff look on, some gazing down The Middle, to the windows, others looking at their shoes. One teacher strokes the hair on his collar.

I look at Buster. He fixes on the floor. I see him reach across towards the corner of one eye.

I continued my studies away from home during the week and for two or three years there was a cold war between my Dad and me. I know that his love for me and his pride in what I was doing with my life as a student helped to melt the frostiness of his feelings about my appearance but I also know that he had been so brutally socialized by the narrow cultural constraints of Army life in the 1930s and 40s that it was hard for him to break free from all that. But he did.

My mother used to have her hair "done" (as she used to say) at Mark's every other Thursday. Mark was the owner of the salon. It wasn't called Mark's but that's what we used to know it as. I used to go with her sometimes. Mark's was in Guildford, the prosperous but dull suburban town where I grew up (when I wasn't away at school). She used to be inside the salon for hours, it seemed, so as I got older I wandered around the town before going back to meet her there.

I have no memory of my mum having her hair done. I remember her hair as it was then, when I was young, as a thick, dark, wavy, auburn mass. It was a part of her that was always there: I never noticed it changing; that was the way she was.

Unquestioningly, I grew up in the presence of my mother, but my dad and I grew towards each other; as I think about it now, we learned to be together. Not long before, he had been a boy himself, a boy whose mother died when he was only nine years old, then, still a boy, he became a soldier and fought and killed and lived in strange lands. He learned to be a father and I learned to be a son. Mum and I lived together, a kind of shared ontology: we simply did things together. Dad's worlds were different and I was invited into them. Many of them existed outside our home. Dad was in the brass band, so I used to go with him to concerts or when they played on the pier at Looe on Sunday afternoons. We had a back garden, out the door and up two sets of back steps. Dad gave me a small plot there and this became a world of growing wonder and adventure. He used to take me to football games, to watch Launceston play in the South Western League and once, on a very memorable occasion, to Plymouth, on the bus, to see Plymouth Argyle play, the then great Newcastle United team in the third round of the FA Cup. I remember all the boys sitting on the touchline for the duration of the game because the ground was so overcrowded, watching with wonder as the likes of Jimmy Scoular and Jackie Milburn pounded the lowly Argyle side into a 6–1 defeat. My memories of these worlds are vivid; they are full of great sensual pleasure, wonder and awe. (I can taste the cup of Bovril I drank and the Ivor Dewdney's pasty that Dad bought for me and handed over the fence at half-time in that game). I enjoyed these worlds but they did seem different from my "real" world, my everyday, living in, day by day world; the world in which I seemed to co-exist with my mum.

I remember the salon. It was on the first floor, above a shop. I can smell it now: all shampoos and hot hair. From the front door, you would walk directly into the cutting area. Women sat in plastic aprons at every chair, hair wet against heads, attended to by other, mostly younger, women wielding combs and scissors and hastily installing a number of protruding clips. To the right was a separate room, where more women sat in more chairs reading the *Daily Mail* or knitting, their heads in giant transparent plastic dryers fixed to the wall.

A world of women. Unrecognizable women, identities flattened amongst the paraphernalia and garb of the hairdressing ritual. Sometimes, as I wandered, a voice would call my name in greeting but I found it difficult to tell, in the noise, where it came from and when I did locate it — after they had repeated the cooing call "Jonathan!" — I wouldn't be able to tell who it was behind the "uniform." It

would be one of my mother's friends. I would have to ask her where my mother was, or my mother herself would have to call me.

A world of unrecognisable women. And Mark. Mark would be there somewhere, usually cutting hair in the background, hidden behind a large woman in a high chair. He was small, a dark-haired, friendly man of whom I never quite felt sure.

Mark played a significant role in our family. The fortnightly two hours clearly allowed space for serious conversations. My mother would quote Mark's views on the public affairs of the time. We came to know about his Jewishness, his reflections upon the Holocaust, his take on immigration, his attitudes to Heath, Wilson, Callaghan and, later, Thatcher. In any mealtime discussion my mother would opine "Well, Mark told me..." or "Mark thinks..." She would have her own views but she found Mark interesting. It became an unfair family joke that if Mark said so it must be true.

I occasionally had my hair cut by Mark or one of his staff. I think. I'm not sure. I never felt at home there. I preferred the barber's — Roy Redford's — where men went.

I remember in my mid to late teens, when many of the battles that I had with my dad about the length of my hair were still rumbling on, having to visit another barber in our town. This wasn't to have a haircut but to purchase a packet of condoms. Actually, as far as I know, no one ever called them condoms. I remember the older men calling them "French Letters" but, for us, to buy a "packet of three" meant asking for them according to their eponymous identification: "A packet of Durex please." I remember that entering Derek Rickard's barber's shop was a challenge. Why did they sell them there? Was it because it was a "Men Only" environment? And did that help to increase the anxiety I felt about doing this? In those days before the introduction of the Pill, at a time when overt sexual promiscuity was relatively rare, this must have been a frightening rite of passage for many young men. The personal antipathy that I had now established toward visiting the barber's compounded these anxieties: I just didn't want to go there.

There was, however, a certain curiosity attached to visiting Derek Rickard's for us young teenagers. He was different. He looked like all the young stars that had been groomed by Larry Parnes a few years before as a challenge to the U.S. domination of the U.K. charts, immediately prior to the Beatles. Derek's quiffed, slicked back hair, Italian-style jackets and "winkle picker" shoes identified him with the likes of Vince Eager, Marty Wilde, and Billy Fury, whose anodyne, syrupy ballads were designed to

charm the first growing generation of 60s teenage girls. We liked him but we didn't really understand him. We knew he was different. His exaggerated movements around the shop, his constant banter, and the scolding of his neatly coiffed little terrier dog, all the time organising his customers as he held his scissors and combs in a particular way, contributed to a persona that was, to us, odd. So, I remember visits to Derek's as having a certain edge and as being somewhat fraught, tinged with fear and anxiety and with an uncertainty about what might happen once I had mustered sufficient courage to push open the condensation-drenched glass door. My fascination with Derek and my awareness of his sexual difference tied in with my reluctance and concerns about having my haircut. While he was a popular figure in our town and while the humour that was directed toward him was never malignant, as far as I know, for me the mystery attached to not knowing about his sexuality became a further reason for me to avoid going to the barber.

On days when I didn't go in with her my mother would return home and one of us would comment to her "You've had your hair done" or "Your hair looks nice." She would always respond: "Thank you. I think it always looks better the next day."

Mark has now long since retired and the salon gone. My mother goes to Kim's. We hear about his views too, though these mostly concern the doubtful merits of Arsenal FC.

And now, all these years later, sitting in a comfortable chair in Toni and Guys, being pampered, a magazine to read and sipping a strong espresso, I look at myself in the mirror, as Debbie fashions my hair according to our amicably negotiated, mutual agreement. I can't really grow my hair long any more; it's grey and has gone thin on top. I still don't want to be here. I have put off coming, "forgetting" to make an appointment until eventually someone, usually my daughter, says something like, "Dad, your hair needs cutting, it looks really scruffy." And I know that she is right. So I condescend and make the appointment. I turn up. I feel old and grumpy, despite the kindly attentions of the hairdressers. The job is done. I pay my money and I walk out into the street. I see my reflection in a shop window and I cringe.

Jonathan reflects upon our hair stories: Here, now, as I read, I do not experience our sequence of writings about hair as a set of texts. I see rhizomatic connections between them, and between them and others' writing. They merge. I experience them as a (waking) dream. I am, nomadically, being led through and between them, wandering.

I see before me a series of scenes and images, ostensibly about and out of different times and spaces, moving, one to the other, overlapping, flowing.

I want to describe this dream, to tell something — some moments — of what I see.

I notice:

The young Jonathan's singular gaze upon Buster, and the collective gaze upon both of them. The uniform. A collective (fantasy of) uniformity.

The inability, implicit in the collective gaze, to accept Buster's difference — his "femininity," the difference in the model of masculinity he presents. I am aware of the (proscribed) sexual desires present but disowned and unexpressed. Hair inviting touch and evoking longing. Jonathan wanting, secretly, to stroke Buster's hair and have Buster stroke his (if only it were longer).

The library and Charlie Davy's. The sensuality of books capturing the young Ken and banishing, for the moment, the prospective experience of being set upon by the barber's scissors, of having something precious to him forcibly taken away. I feel inside me, as I watch, his dread, which he manages to keep at bay as he touches pages and eats their words.

I see conflict between Ken and his father; his father's control and power; Ken's hair a symbol, initially, of his father's construction of him as a boy, as a becoming-man (and a becoming man); and then Ken's growing, initially subtle, resistance as he takes control not over going to Charlie Davy's premises but over how the barber shapes his hair; and finally the bolder, decisive confrontation as Ken attaches himself to a friend and his friend's power — physically, literally, holding on to them — as he fails to show up at the allotted haircut time.

Gazes: His father's gaze. A multiplicity of gazes in the school hall. Ken's father's gaze defining (for a time at least) masculinities. And resistance: Ken's defiant staring back.

I glimpse, to one side, Brown's barbershop in Alexander (2003). The barbershop where Alexander was sent, along with his brothers, by their father; the small, white, wooden stand-alone building whose picture I still carry, the prospect of which for Alexander, similar to Ken with Charlie Davy's, always

...involved a sense of dread, the confusion between choice and voice — knowing that until we would be 15 years old, that no matter what haircut we said we wanted, Mr Brown would give us the haircut my father wanted. (p.112)

Was Charlie Davy's, a white, English barber's, a discursive, cultural space (ibid. p.106) like Brown's (Black and North American), whose men "talked their way into (Ken's)

memories" (p.112)? It seems so — the jokes, the teasing and the talk of war "schooling" the boy into the ways of men.

The dream continues.

I watch, I feel, the raw, sexual energy of the young Jagger and his band — guitars, hips, and hair — their presence carving through the quiet, trussed-up living room, tracing lines of flight, forging openings, breaking both taboos and Ken's father's heart as he sees his son mirrored in this band of young men.

The scene of the family watching the Stones in this moment, as I watch, embodies the struggle between son and father — between countless teenage boys and their fathers — for power, authority, and the son's autonomy to choose his own masculinities from a wider, or different, menu of possibilities than the father's. Though I wonder: how much choice, how much agency, does Ken have?

The trussed-up body of men and boys — slippery terms, ambiguous images — in that school hall, unable to deal with the line of flight that is Buster.

The loss and sadness (though not only these) in both stories.

The dream shifts to a different hairdresser's: Mark's.

The gaze, now, is of women not men (though, confused, I am a man watching a man's tale of women, under the supervisory eye of a man, gazing upon a boy).

From trussed-up men to trussed-up women, identities obscured in the cultural performance of hair being "dressed." The sadomasochistic imagery of clips and scissors, of being "tied up" and placed under machinery. A small boy trying to find his way, confused and a little afraid, unable to decide where to be with these women or what to make of the one man present, and, as the boy gets older, dismissive, mocking of his mother's incorporation of the little man's world view, a story that suggests something of the young Jonathan's inclination to belittle the feminine and compete with the masculine.

Ken and his mother as one. His father is outside for a time, then his father takes him aside, draws him away from the symbiosis Ken experiences with his mother into a world of kicks, balls, shouting, and camaraderie, drinking in the Bovril strength of the masculinity offered him.

Ken now, as a man, looking in puzzlement at his mother's hair — questioning, perhaps, what kind of wo/man/person he is — wondering what she did with her hair, speculating over how — whether — she cut it, shaped it, dressed it. A different femininity (his? hers?), a woman of a different time and place to Jonathan's.

The kitchen of Alexander's boyhood home (Alexander, 2003), where his mother attended his sisters' hair: his curiosity, the smell, the conversation among women from

which he was explicitly excluded. Women's talk (ibid., p.117) which, like Jonathan, Alexander was — and is, in the salon he now attends — privy to but apart from.

Then, the barber's — not Charlie Davy's but Derek Rickard's — as a site of ambiguous sexual possibility. Ken's ambivalence: intrigue and fascination balanced by doubt and fear.

And the man Ken, at ease with the caress of Debbie's hands on his head, though maybe unable entirely to dislocate this being touched with the desire for reciprocation, sensing her youth and beauty and his increasing distance from it, reading magazines (much like one of the women in rows at Mark's). Reluctant still, attending only through the promptings of his daughter.

His hair a reminder to him, wistfully, of youth and rebellion, but more than that: He sees in the shop window his questioning gaze upon himself and he feels bad. He dislikes what he sees. He has to look away. He wishes that the image wasn't there.

Our Storying as Collective Biography

In our recent collaborations we have examined subjectivity/ies (Gale and Wyatt, 2006; Gale and Wyatt, 2007). Over the past two years, as part of the doctoral program we are undertaking, we have written and responded to each other through the exchange of texts attached to e-mails (we live many miles apart), a form of postmodern (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003), interactive (Ellis and Berger, 2003) interviewing. We have worked in pursuit of understanding (our) subjectivities and their "becomings" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Deleuze and Parnet, 2002; etc.).

During this time we have not, until now, explored our subjectivities as "men."

We have grappled with this. Have we avoided the subject of gender? Were we concerned about how we would deal with it? How much of our apparent avoidance of the subject was itself gendered? As evidenced by the content of this paper, and by our struggle in its process, gender is difficult, challenging, and anxiety provoking. This, we suspect, is why our curiosities have not proceeded beyond tentative inquiries.

Our starting point (though it has taken us a while to reach it) is that we do not take the assignation "men" for granted. With feminist and queer theories, and with Judith Butler's work in particular (e.g., Butler, 1999; Butler, 2004), in mind, we view "sex," "sexuality," and "gender" (among other terms) as contested. We work with the hypothesis that "men" is a "term in process" (Butler 1999, p.45) and seek to place it *sous rature* (Derrida, 1976). We have no choice but to work with it (and other categories) — "...this is the oppressor's language/yet I need it to talk to you" (Rich, 1993) — but through our collective biographical work here, we look to (cause) trouble (Butler, 1999).

We are interested in how the worlds that we inhabited, and that inhabited us, in our early lives produced, and continue to produce, us as “boys” and “men.” We, along with Davies and Gannon (2006), work with Foucault’s view that gender and sexuality are discursively constructed categories of knowledge as opposed to discovered identities. As Butler writes:

If gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not “do” one’s gender alone. One is always “doing” with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my “own” gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself) (2004, p.1).

We see our task in this paper as exploring, through narratives of our pasts, both the constraints upon us at the time and our improvisations. We also are mindful that the process of writing these texts was, equally, about “doing” gender in the present, with each other as well as in the wider “sociality”.

Collective biography (and memory work, its forbear) has developed as a feminist, emancipatory research methodology. It has mostly been undertaken by groups of women gathered in one place for the purpose of researching aspects of being or becoming women. Onyx and Small (2001) give an overview of the development of “memory-work” over the past two decades. They outline the method used by Crawford et al (1992), a procedure used by much subsequent work. The method/procedure contains three phases with the first two each involving five and six basic rules (as Haug et al., 1987, label them) respectively. The third phase is, essentially, a single process of gathering together, analysing and writing up. Amongst these set phases and rules are instructions, for example, to write memories, to write in the third person, to “not import interpretation, explanation or biography” (Onyx and Small, 2001, p.776), to “look for similarities and differences” (ibid, p.777), and to search for those words or phrases that are, as clichés or generalisations, markers of the taken-for-granted world. The purpose is to uncover social understandings and meanings (op. cit.). Onyx and Small describe Davies’ (and others’) more recent development of “collective biography” and notes its four (rather than three) phases where, initially, the group *tells* stories before moving onto the writing.

While Onyx and Small (2001) and Crawford et al (1992) suggest what appears to be a certain rigidity of method, we align ourselves closer to Davies and Gannon’s

(2006) encouragement to take collective biography and appropriate it “to suit the topic, ourselves, and the time and space we (have) found ourselves in” (Davies and Gannon, 2006:18). In this paper, in contrast to most other studies, our “collective” is two (but see Gannon, 2004), is men (but see also Pease, 2000 and 2002, and Speedy, 2005) and is separated by two hundred miles. Our biography is in the first person, is interrupted by comments on process, and at times contains reference to theory. We do not neatly divorce our theoretical selves from our embodied story-telling selves (Davies and Gannon 2006, p.20). Our approach is influenced by seeing our narratives through a Deleuzian lens, where we seek to set up and follow lines of flight, to experience haecceities, to make rhizomatic connections, to “(bring) into play within us and outside us populations, multiplicities, territories, becomings, affects, events” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002, p.38).

We have worked with our ways of “plugging in” Deleuze (St Pierre, 2004, p.284), the sense that we make of Deleuzian figures, in earlier papers (Gale and Wyatt, 2006; Gale and Wyatt, 2007). We find these figures liberating; they free us to write away from the established, from the given, from the taken-for-granted, of—as Deleuze would say—*striated space* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Inspired by Deleuze we seek to translate striated into *smooth space* (ibid.), where we draw diagonals “across the horizontal and vertical” (ibid. p.528), and seek to transform delimited fabric into the openness of felt (ibid.). Felt, symbolised in the tangled fibres (ibid.) of our stories in this piece.

Our process of working together was thus: initially, we had an e-mail conversation in which we discussed how difficult we were experiencing the search for our memories of being in gendered worlds. Jonathan—perhaps because by then we had given voice to the difficulties—wrote a story about travelling to boarding school, which Ken responded to with a boarding school story of his own. We continued: another boarding school story from Jonathan, this time about hair, that Ken picked up on; and hair captured our imagination. Two further stories from each of us about hair followed, one spinning off the other in turn.

This process replaced—and conflated—the collective biography stages described by Davies and Gannon (2006) of telling, writing, and reading aloud. We later took responsibility for editing our own and the other’s writings, and then each for standing back from sets of stories and reflecting upon them: Ken took the first two (boarding school) stories and Jonathan the later (hair) stories. At this point our focus was upon thickening our descriptions, as opposed to ‘peeling away’ from them layers of cliché (Davies and Gannon, 2006, p.7). This again was a conflation of stages, those of re-writing and analysis, proposed by Davies and Gannon (2006).

We are not proposing that our methodology was 'better' than those proposed by others. Indeed, it is likely that we lost out, for example, by not *hearing*, and thereby experiencing as embodied, each other's narratives (Davies and Gannon, 2006).

Final Thoughts

We are conscious of how power is seen to be exercised throughout our narratives. There is power exercised by men on men, by women on men, by men on women, by women on women. By, through, and on us, Ken and Jonathan. Lines of force (e.g., Foucault, 1980) run through us and are taken up by us (Davies and Gannon, 2006, p.155), as we attempt to understand ourselves as gendered beings. There is a certain discomfort now, as we reflect upon this work, in sensing how sexuality and power seem, at least at times, inseparable (Pease, 2000). We are caught by how "felt" — an "entanglement of fibres" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.475) — are masculinity and femininity, and gender and sexuality, power and all of these.

However, we are also caught by the hope and energy that we feel as we write. As we seek to locate this optimism we notice that it is contained in two related aspects of the experience. Firstly, there is the experience of writing itself: writing our genders is a method of inquiry (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) — we are "becoming" in the writing. In the action/being of our writing we are writing ourselves.

Secondly, there is the experience of writing *with each other*. Crawford et al. (1992) explain that the theory behind memory work is that:

Significant events, events which are remembered, and the way they are subsequently constructed, play an important part in the construction of self (p.37).

Davies and Gannon (2006) stress the embodied nature of the narratives produced through the collective biography process. What seems to be emphasised insufficiently in both Crawford et al. and Davies and Gannon is not only the embodied (re)construction of events but the *relational* context in which they are told (but see Gannon's reference to Cixous and the "interconscious" element in writing — Gannon, 2006, p.491). In both cases we are informed that the stories are told and/or written by a group of people together — but there is no great play of who they are to each other and why telling their stories to those particular women led to those particular self constructions. We, Ken and Jonathan, are talking with each other, with our experience of our shared history. Because of what has gone before, and because of our shared present and prospective shared future, we can perform these versions of our masculinities today.

In Pease's memory work with men, his experience is that men become able to

“recreate” their subjectivities (Pease, 2002, p.174). We also experience a sense of (re) creating our subjectivities and it is this that is a source of our hope and energy. However, again, we would go further than Pease by emphasising that it is the haecceity—the here, now, together, at this point in our histories, in our “transmutation of fluxes” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002, p.33)—that is crucial.

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